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“Anthrax Protection: Progress or Problems?”

Statement of Rep. Christopher Shays

May 9, 2006

In September and October 2001, envelopes containing anthrax were mailed to post offices and public office buildings. Twenty-two individuals in four states and Washington, DC contracted anthrax; five died.

The investigation, to date, has not revealed who converted letters and packages into vectors of disease. The only things we have are the lessons learned from these events. They remain our best defense against further attempts to contaminate the mail and other public places with anthrax.

Today we ask two questions:

- How effective has our government been in developing medical countermeasures against an anthrax attack?
- How accurate are anthrax detection techniques?

The Department of Homeland Security is responsible for coordinating federal operations within the United States to prepare for, respond to, and recover from terrorist attacks, major disasters and other emergencies.

Other government agencies with a stake in applying the lessons learned from the anthrax attack include the Departments of Defense and Health and Human Services; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; and the Environmental Protection Agency.

In 2004, President Bush authorized \$5.6 billion over 10 years through Project BioShield for the government to purchase and stockpile vaccines and drugs to fight anthrax, smallpox and other potential agents of bioterror. This program represents a critical tool in the war against terrorism as a flexible, streamlined means to identify, develop, procure and stockpile medical countermeasures.

However, there are indications inadequate planning and bureaucratic finger pointing are challenging the measures President Bush put in motion to defend the United States.

Mr. Alex Azar, Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Department of Health and Human Services, acknowledged in Congressional testimony on April 6, that the lack of a strategic plan for BioShield has left industry guessing about the government's priorities.

A Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on anthrax detection addressed our inability to accurately detect anthrax. The report recommended the Secretary of Homeland Security work with all agencies to "ensure appropriate validation studies of the overall process of sampling activities..."

The Department of Homeland Security responded to the GAO report by stating the Environmental Protection Agency has the primary responsibility establishing the strategies, guidelines and plans for recovery from a biological attack while the Department of Health and Human Services has the lead role for any related public health response guidelines.

After two years we are still waiting for a strategic plan and a validation of the sampling process to determine, for instance, whether Madison Square Garden or the room we are sitting in right now is free from anthrax.

I believe these issues merit our urgent attention. We owe it to those who contracted anthrax and particularly to those who died from the infection, including Ms. Otilie Lundgren from Oxford, in my own state of Connecticut.

To help us understand the issues involved we have two panels of distinguished witnesses including representatives from the Government Accountability Office; the Departments of Defense, Health and Human Services, and Homeland Security; and the Environmental Protection Agency; and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

We appreciate the time our witnesses took out of their schedules to be with us today, and look forward to hearing their testimony explaining agency preparations to defend the nation from another anthrax attack.